

They're Back and Better Than Ever

SPAWAR Systems Center New Orleans Welcomes Back Employees

By Maria LoVasco Tolleson, SSC New Orleans Public Affairs Officer

Almost 11 months after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina, Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center (SSC) New Orleans welcomed back its workforce with a ribbon cutting ceremony July 13. About 200 guests attended the ceremony, many of them visitors representing the companies that helped to refurbish the center.

SPAWAR Commander Rear Adm. Michael Bachmann served as the special guest speaker. Other speakers included Dr. Timothy Ryan, Chancellor of the University of New Orleans (UNO) and Mr. Patrick Gibbs, president and CEO of the UNO Foundation, which owns and operates the UNO Research and Technology Park where the center is located on Lake Pontchartrain.



From left to right: State Representative Steve Scalise; Mr. David Mize representing New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin; Chancellor Timothy Ryan; Ms. Priscilla Warsley-Riley representing New Orleans Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell; Rear Adm. Michael Bachmann; Capt. Fred J. Mingo; Mr. Patrick Gibbs; Louisiana State Senator Derrick Shepherd.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, almost 800 SSC New Orleans employees scattered to work sites throughout the nation. Sites included Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Fla.; Naval Support Activity Mid-South in Millington, Tenn.; and Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, Fort Worth, Texas. The Defense Integrated Military Human Resources System and the Navy Standard Integrated Personnel System, which were collocated with SSC New Orleans, relocated to Arlington, Va.

Although the facility itself was not flooded as a result of the nearby levee breach, the buildings suffered extensive roof damage, which allowed rainwater to get inside the walls of the building causing widespread mold and water damage.

About 80 employees were able to return to the facility in December 2005 to work in office trailers set up in the front parking lot of the damaged buildings. Others returned to work at the Naval Support Activity New Orleans, from Stennis Space Center in Mississippi, and from leased contractor spaces in Luling and Mandeville, two outlying suburbs of the Greater New Orleans area.

In the first week after the hurricane, a small team of SSC New Orleans employees arranged for a helicopter to fly them above the Research Park to assess the damage to the complex. Most of the city still lay underwater and access was impossible.

As soon as the waters began to recede, a damage assessment team, made up of members of the command's Information Technology Department, began to hand-carry hundreds of servers, computers

and other equipment down five flights of stairs in darkened buildings without air conditioning. Temperatures topped 95 F in the blistering heat.

In May 2006, Rear Adm. Bachmann recognized two members of this team, Lt. Lois Tink and Mr. Dwayne Green, as SPAWARRIORS of the Quarter. They also received an award from the New Orleans Federal Executive Board.

Many employees assumed tasks outside of their normal functions to continue to maintain critical Navy pay and personnel systems.

The majority of the workforce sustained personal loss and severe damage to their homes. Many had to deal with hardships and

attempt home repairs from hundreds of miles away.

Still, since those first bleak weeks in September 2005, the single-minded goal of the command's leadership has been to return the workforce to New Orleans.

"This facility reopening is critical to this area," said Chancellor Tim Ryan during the ceremony. "We are here today to celebrate what will be the catalyst for rebuilding this part of New Orleans. It is important to get the jobs and people back in order to rebuild."

Rear Adm. Bachmann first visited the facility in May 2006. When he returned in July for the ribbon cutting ceremony he was astonished at the progress.

"Since my last visit two months ago, I have tried to convey to the rest of the Navy the dire circumstances you are facing. You have done an amazing job dealing with the situation and continuing to provide exceptional service to the Navy," Bachmann said. He echoed Ryan's sentiments regarding the return of the command to work from the refurbished New Orleans facility. "We were always committed to coming back."

Now retired SSC New Orleans Commanding Officer Capt. Fred Mingo praised the can-do spirit of his employees and talked about both the struggle and the resiliency of individuals continuing to exhibit extraordinary professionalism and resourcefulness in an environment of enduring hardship and devastation. "This marks the end of our recovery and the beginning of our next chapter," he said. "As a team, we're unbeatable."

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